

By Talal Eid and Don Argue

While India recently celebrated 62 years of independence as the world's largest democracy, this month also marked the first anniversary of the anti-Christian violence in the state of Orissa.

India is home to people from a multitude of cultural and religious backgrounds, and its modern identity rests on a tradition of secular governance dating back to its independence.

Yet recurring problems with religious discrimination and eruptions of communal violence are creating some very unfortunate breaks in this narrative.

Because local governments have failed to respond adequately to such incidents, and the national government has failed to take effective measures to protect the rights of its citizens who belong to religious minorities, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has put India on its 2009 Watch List.

When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited India last month, she and India's external affairs minister, S.M. Krishna, committed to building an enhanced India-U.S. strategic partnership that seeks to "advance solutions to the defining challenges of our time."

Both leaders committed to working toward a world without nuclear weapons, advancing common security interests, pursuing sustainable growth and economic development, and collaboration on energy security and climate change.

But, there appeared to be little or no bilateral discussion of human rights concerns in India.

Last year, Maoists murdered a Hindu religious leader known for his anti-Christian rhetoric, and it sparked a violent campaign targeting Christians in Orissa. The violence, which went on for several weeks, was carried out by supporters of Hindu nationalist groups and resulted in the destruction of hundreds of homes, dozens of churches, and at least 40 deaths. Not only did police forces fail to protect Christians, but there were also indications of awareness, and perhaps assistance, by state and local officials.

Although the Orissa government has ordered an investigation into the violence, only six people have been convicted, and Christians in Orissa continue to face intolerance and intimidation by Hindu nationalist groups.

More than 30,000 Christians are still living in poor conditions in refugee camps and are being threatened that, in order to return home, they must "reconvert" to Hinduism. The Indian government must do more to supply the displaced with basic supplies and provide security for a safe return.

While the state government took preventive measures in Orissa immediately after the attacks

so that the 2008 Christmas holiday occurred without incident, the central Indian government could undoubtedly do more to prevent and also to redress religious-based violence in Orissa and elsewhere.

More disturbingly, such violence is not a new phenomenon in India; for all of the country's progress, communal violence remains a perennial problem.

The riots in Orissa were a painful reminder of the 2002 riots in the state of Gujarat, where over 2,000 Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs, hundreds of mosques and Muslim-owned businesses were looted or destroyed, and more than 100,000 people fled their homes. As alleged in Orissa, government investigations uncovered complicity by Gujarat state government officials and police inaction in the midst of these attacks.

Efforts to pursue the perpetrators of the Gujarat violence have made little progress. Seven years later, human rights groups report that many cases will likely remain unresolved or result in acquittals because of alleged lack of evidence or insufficient efforts on the part of local police.

For all of its economic gains, India continues to suffer from impediments to justice within the police, judiciary, and state government apparatus that have in a number of instances affected religious minorities.

In June, the Indian government refused to issue visas for USCIRF commissioners and staff to visit India to discuss religious freedom conditions with government officials, religious leaders and civil society activists.

Instead of avoiding discussion of religious freedom concerns, the Indian government should confront these incidents of communal violence. India's citizens and law enforcement personnel must find a greater appreciation for international human rights guarantees, including those directed at the protection of religious minorities. In particular, Indian officials should take proactive steps to prevent further violence and challenge cultures of impunity in areas with a history of communal tension.

If India wants to promote its rich history of religious pluralism and the peaceful coexistence of different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups, the Indian government must take strong measures to address the plight of Christians in Orissa, as well as Muslims waiting for justice in Gujarat. Only then can it truly take advantage of its religious diversity and move away from repetition of similar violence.

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